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AUTHOR Scissons, Edward H.
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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a model of psychometric needs assessment developed by the author and discusses how the model, which is designed to profile key abilities and weaknesses, could be applied to the needs assessment, counseling, and training of middle and senior executives. A pilot study on 130 middle management executives is examined in conjunction with a description of an ongoing research study on the application of the model. Implications of the study are discussed in terms of developmental vocational counseling and the mapping of lifelong training programs. A summary is provided of the attributes of the psychometric needs assessment model, citing its advantages and disadvantages and comparing it with more conventional needs assessment procedures. A number of diagrams, including one of the model, are presented. (LMS)

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EXECUTIVE ABILITIES: Implications for the Counselling and Training of Middle and Senior Executives

EDWARD H. (ED) SCISSONS, PH.D.
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

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Edward H. (Ed) Scissons, Ph.D.
Registered Psychologist
Associate Professor

Purpose and Summary

The purposes of this paper are to outline a model of psychometric needs assessment developed by the author and to apply this model to the needs assessment, counselling, and training of middle and senior executives. A pilot project incorporating a major aspect of this model is examined in conjunction with a description of a long term research study of which the pilot program forms a nucleus.

Needs

Counselling and training, be they undertaken with executives, students, plumbers, or teachers, are directly concerned with needs. Needs are usually defined in terms of a "measurable discrepancy between current outcomes and desired or required outcomes (Witkin, 1976)." Put simply, needs are a measure of the difference between where we are and where we want or need to go.

The notion of "needs" is important whether one is talking of counselling or training. In counselling, one uses the notion of needs in describing the helping goals (Scissons, 1976a). In training, needs are used as an indicator of an imbalance between that which is required and/or desirable in order to perform job related functions and that which an individual or group actually possesses.

Insert Figure 1

The notions of needs and interests are entwined inextricably in most analysis of training need identification (Witkin, 1976); people, it seems, need what they want and want what they need. Throughout the course of this paper, I will be dealing in only a limited way with interests and will restrict myself to an adaptation of Witkin's (1976) notion of needs. A need, for purposes of this paper will refer largely to the discrepancy between current and required outcomes in whatever realm this occurs. Although one cannot deny a high convergence between needs and interests, the distinction between desired and required outcomes is made because it is at the heart of the psychometric needs assessment model with which I will be dealing. Undoubtedly, errors are made by ignoring either aspect in needs assessment; what I am attempting to clarify is that I have chosen to err on the side of ignoring interests rather than ignoring needs.

Insert Figure 2

The Needs - Counselling - Training Paradigm

Counsellors have traditionally been concerned with models (Brammer, 1973; Scissons, 1976a). Counselling models are usually process models, models which attempt to understand and sequence the counselling relationship. Since those concerned with the training and counselling of executives are directly concerned with "states of need," needs must be taken into account before the process and sequence of counselling and training can be fully understood.

Insert Figure 3

Taking this discrepancy based definition of needs outlined earlier, it is important to realize that needs are used as a feed source for both counselling and training with counselling serving as a secondary feed source for training. This process is cyclical as both counselling and training are recognized as changing current outcomes, i.e., the present state of the organism.

Psychometric Executive Need Assessment

The actual determination of executive training and counselling needs is no different from the process used with other occupational groups. Involved is a determination of the state of relative imbalance between the requirements of the position and the actual state of the executive or groups of executives in terms of these requirements. Needs then are used as feeders for the design or selection of individual and group executive training programs, for executive placement, and for developmental vocational counselling.

A psychometric model of needs assessment utilizes standardized psychometric evaluators to form the data base on which needs are inferred. In its simplest form, an executive or groups of executives are subjected to rigorous psychological evaluation through intensive standardized "testing." Of interest are a broad range of ability and personality characteristics, e.g., intellectual functioning, oral communication, supervisory effectiveness, management level planning and problem solving (Scissons, 1976b). Two patterns of

results analyses are common. In the first pattern, an individual executive's profile is compared with that of a "typical" profile for the desired referent sub-group. Thus, an individual is able to compare him/herself on a wide range of criterial abilities as an aid to effective vocational decision making. In the second pattern, particular sub-groups of executive profiles are compared to other sub-group profiles or larger sub-group profiles as an aid to macro organizational decision making, i.e., it is possible to compare beginning structural engineers with management level structural engineers either individually or collectively. Current outcomes and required outcomes are compared, the resulting imbalance being taken as an indicator of need(s).

Insert Figure 4

A traditional (and well founded) argument against the use of standardized psychometric measures in the assessment of need has rested on the heterogeneous norm base of most psychometric instruments. In order to be widely accepted, norms for most psychological instruments are reported in terms of ratings for a fictitious "average" person. This "average" person is arrived at by pooling the results of a widely heterogeneous group. The problem with such norms, when used for the purpose outlined here, is that they hide as much as they reveal. Important differences within groups are masked by possibly larger between group differences leaving a bland "average" profile. For purposes of training and vocational counselling, such heterogeneous norming is clearly inhibatory.

Although the "local norm" approach has always been advocated by psychological test authors and distributors, little use has actually been made of them in executive ability evaluation. There are good reasons; necessity of large sub-group samples, difficulty of obtaining clearly identifiable sub-group formulations, and cost. The result is that practitioners, mainly applied industrial psychologists, are forced to mentally extrapolate "the executive profile" from the heterogeneous formulated data base which is readily available in test manuals. That is not to say that such procedures are not good, but they are highly individualistic.

Psychometric Needs Identification and Training

As noted earlier, there are two major dimensions of analyses utilizing psychometric information; the utilization of individual and sub-group results.

Insert Figure 5

The major use of the individual assessment pattern (the left side of Figure 5) is in the selection of training programs. An individual's profile is compared to that of a desired referent group and, based on this analysis, an individual training prescription is formulated. Since the process is cyclical, this necessitates re-evaluation again, changing the individual's profile which is then used for further needs identification.

The major use of the sub-group assessment pattern (the right side of Figure 5) is in the design of training programs. As already

noted, this patterns involves the comparison of different sub-groups with design decisions being based on perceived deficits or dissimilarity. This pattern too is cyclical, being that future sub-group norming will be different from what initially exists due to training and maturation.

Psychometric Needs Assessment and Counselling

Various approaches to the process of counselling have been well documented (Brammer, 1973; Bergin & Garfield, 1971). All are oriented towards a change in the state of the client as a result of counsellor intervention. A process model of counselling (Scissons, 1976a) is very amenable for integration with a psychometric needs identification model.

Insert Figure 6

In using this model, we are restricted to the first of our results analyses pattern descriptions noted earlier; individual analysis. To start the process, an individual's current assessment (individual assessment) is compared with the desired sub-group (sub-group normings) in order to formulate a needs discrepancy (needs identification). This needs discrepancy is framed mainly in terms of required outcomes, i.e., what is needed for profile similarity with the desired reference group. Tempering the so-called required outcome with the desired outcomes leads to some form of problem identification which serves as a focal point for the remainder of the counselling process.[1] Training enters the counselling

picture as only one method to be utilized in exploring change strategies. Both training and the last stage of the counselling process, generalization, serve as the cyclical return points to a new individual assessment which again leads to a different needs identification.

The Psychometric Needs Assessment Project

As noted earlier, the whole psychometric needs assessment model is based squarely on the prerequisite of identifiable sub-group norming. This is neither quick nor easy, involving the systematic assessment of large numbers of executives of varied occupational categories. At present, I am half-way through the first year of an extensive five year data collection undertaking with middle and senior executives, but I would like at this point to present a capsule summary of some initial results.

Of necessity, smaller sub-group analysis becomes possible only with very large samples so that each sub-group has enough subjects to warrant any inter-group comparisons. The results that I would like to present then, are between the poles of heterogeneous macro group norms and homogeneous micro group (single occupational classification) norms. I shall refer to these as "meso group results." These results, based on approximately 130 male subjects (600 on CPI), were obtained from a reference group of "middle and low middle management technical executives." Professions represented were largely engineering (various branches), technical sales, and financial managers.

Insert Figures 7 - 10

It is noteworthy that even at this imperfect level of specificity, these meso group results differ markedly from the more homogeneous macro group results (represented by the straight heavy line drawn through the 50th percentile or a T score of 50).[2] Even fairly broad classifications of executives represent themselves as different from the general population--a general population comprised of the integration of many micro or meso populations. The technical executives in this meso sample present themselves as more intelligent, achievement oriented, dominant, assertive, enterprising, conventional socially poised, and perceptive than the population as a whole. As well these male executives have less need for autonomy and are less "macho" in the traditional male based sense of the term.

Of course, these meso group results as presented here are not really good for anything--yet. At a simplistic level, it is possible to think in general terms of "interpersonal skill courses" and "assertiveness training courses" for aspiring managers who demonstrate need based on comparison with this group, but the measure is far from refined. I have included the measures purely as an indicator of the direction of psychometric needs assessment with executives. If meso group analysis can point up identifiable differences, micro group analysis should be much more fine a measure, the kind of measure needed for the design and selection of prescriptive ability-based counselling and training programs.

For purposes of analysis and discussion, let me outline in summary form other attributes of a psychometric needs assessment model for use in executive training and counselling.

1. In contrast to more conventional need identification measures, the psychometric method emphasizes needs rather than interests in the identification of training programs.
2. The model is very amenable to rigorous validity testing.
3. As Snow (1974) and Scissons (1976c) have indicated, unobtrusiveness should be a major characteristic of data collection models. The psychometric model is more unobtrusive as to what is being measured than are conventional need assessment data collection techniques.
4. The model fits in very well with current recruitment practices for middle and senior executives where there is an ever increasing reliance on standardized psychometric evaluation.
5. Data collection instruments are standardized, resulting in a greater knowledge of the inherent error factor.
6. Generalizability of findings is increased due to the obtaining of a standardized data base through standardized assessment measures.
7. The model is both understandable by and acceptable to the target population.
8. A disadvantage is that most characteristics tested are done so by non-behavioral means (attitudes, etc.) but this disadvantage is, also, characteristic of more traditional needs assessment strategies.

9. The model is particularly useful for vocational counselling in that standardized comparisons are possible for executives considering occupational change or advancement.

10. The psychometric model fits in well with other, less psychometric procedures, i.e., job descriptions, self perceptions of ability, etc.

11. From the perspective of the practitioner, one disadvantage may be that the actual use of the procedures requires an intermediate knowledge of statistical procedures (or a bright young assistant!!).

12. The model is particularly useful for the design of in-house executive training and counselling systems since it fits well with more traditional rating systems.

13. The simplistic meso group results already available (as well as preliminary unreported data presently being analyzed) indicates that the major differences between executives and the general population lie in the interpersonal, assertive, oral persuasiveness areas. If verified by further analyses, this information will be very useful for the design of junior executive training programs as well as for developmental vocational counselling.

It is still premature to evaluate the effectiveness of psychometric needs analysis procedures in the training and counselling of middle and senior executives. To be realistic, it is unlikely that such procedures, because of their relative complexity and slow

"on-stream" time, well ever usurp more "seat of the pants" needs assessment procedures--nor should they. Until some detailed inter-method reliability studies are conducted with the host of needs assessment strategies currently in use, the arguing for or against any single method is a moot point. Suffice it to say that the psychometric method, although fledgling, offers a great deal of promise as a reasoned approach to executive needs identification.

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Footnotes

[1] The complete counselling process will not be explained in detail in the paper. The reader is referred to Scissons (1976a) for a more complete explanation.

[2] Subscale descriptions will not be dealt with in detail in this paper. The reader is referred to the appropriate test manual for a complete description of each instrument and subscale.

FIGURE 1

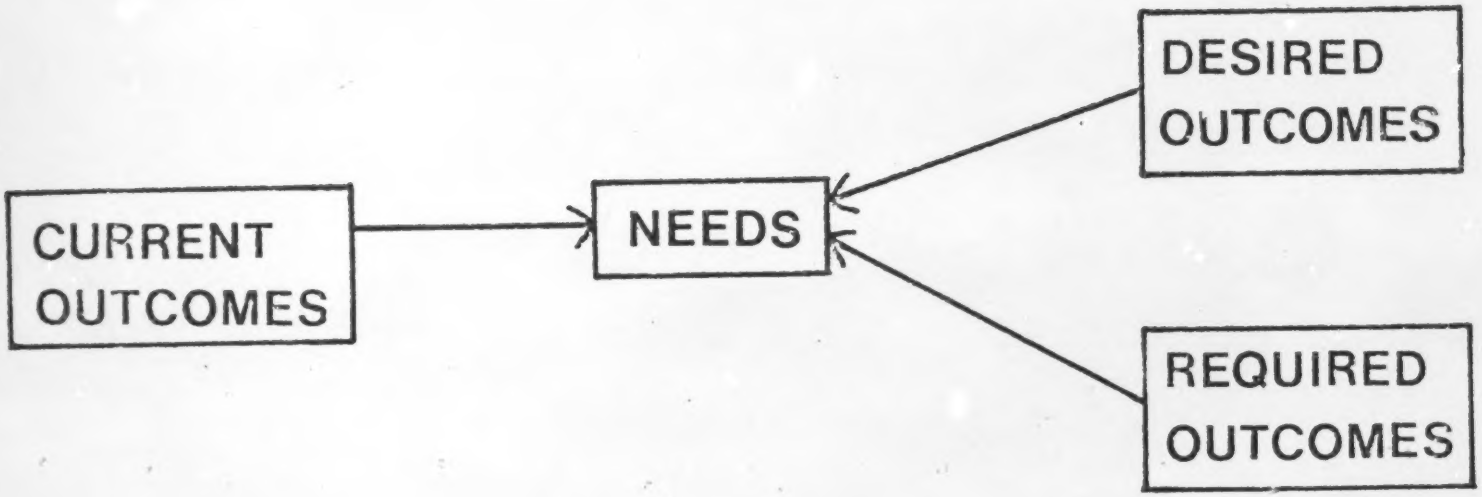

DESIRED OUTCOMES
CURRENT OUTCOMES
NEEDS
REQUIRED OUTCOMES

FIGURE 2

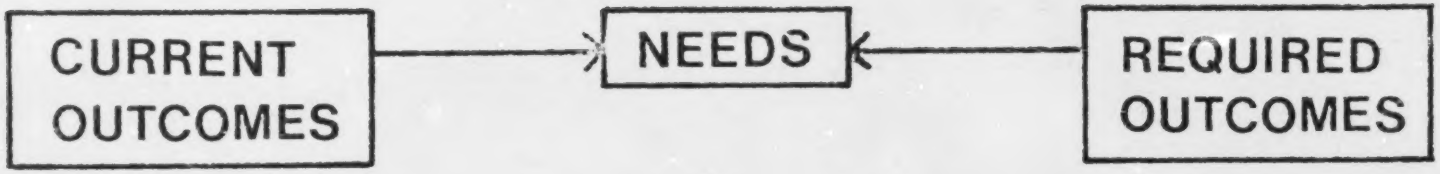
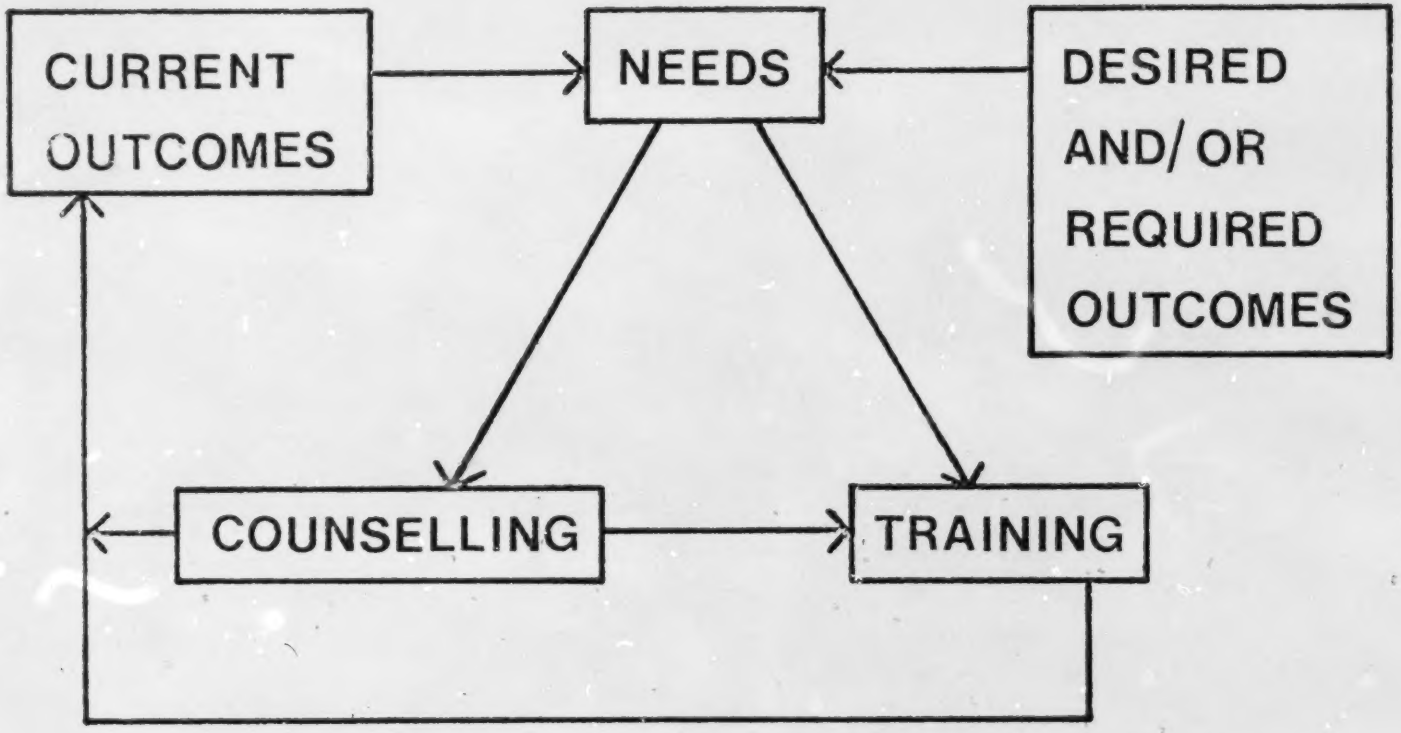
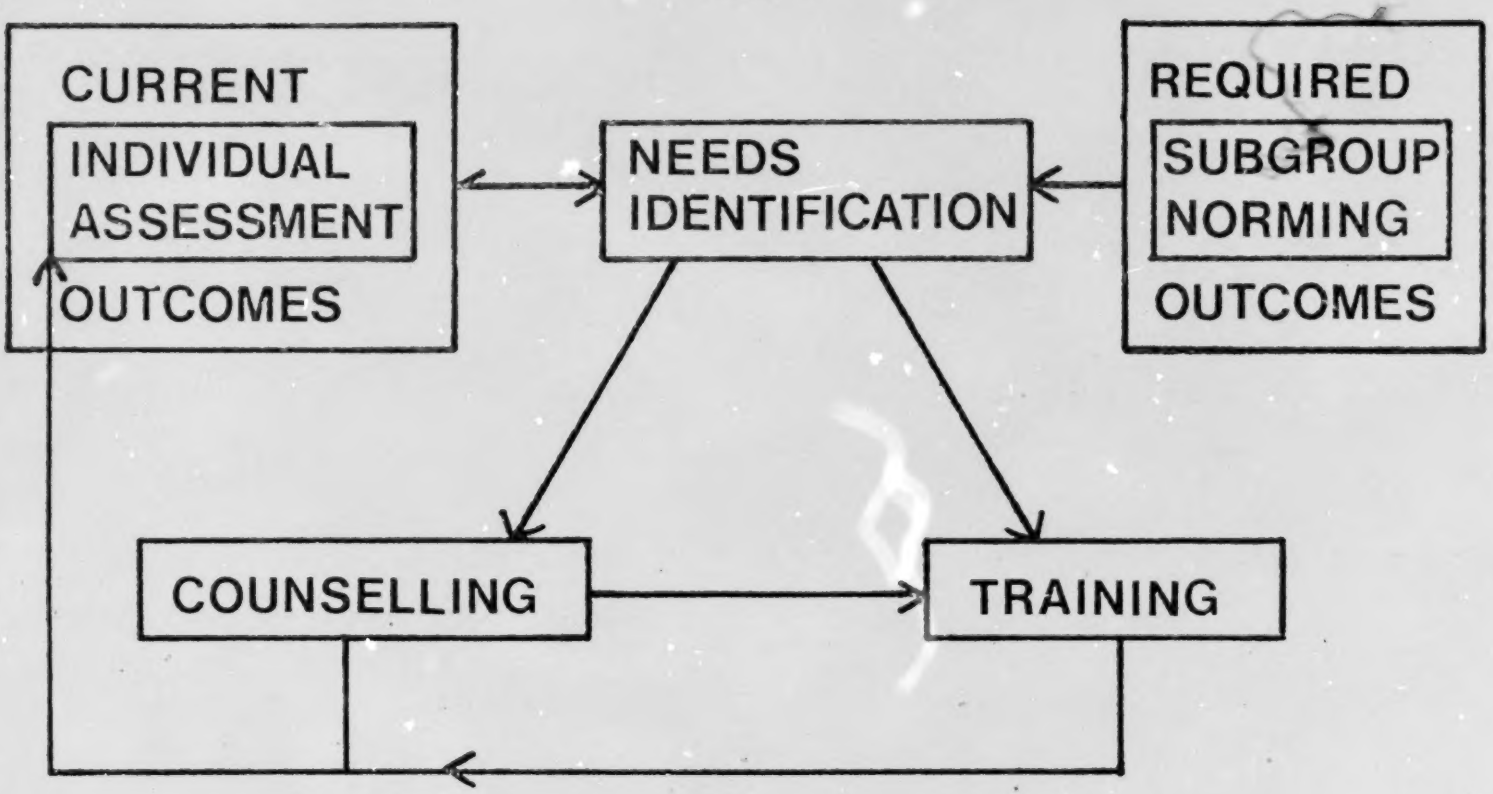


FIGURE 3



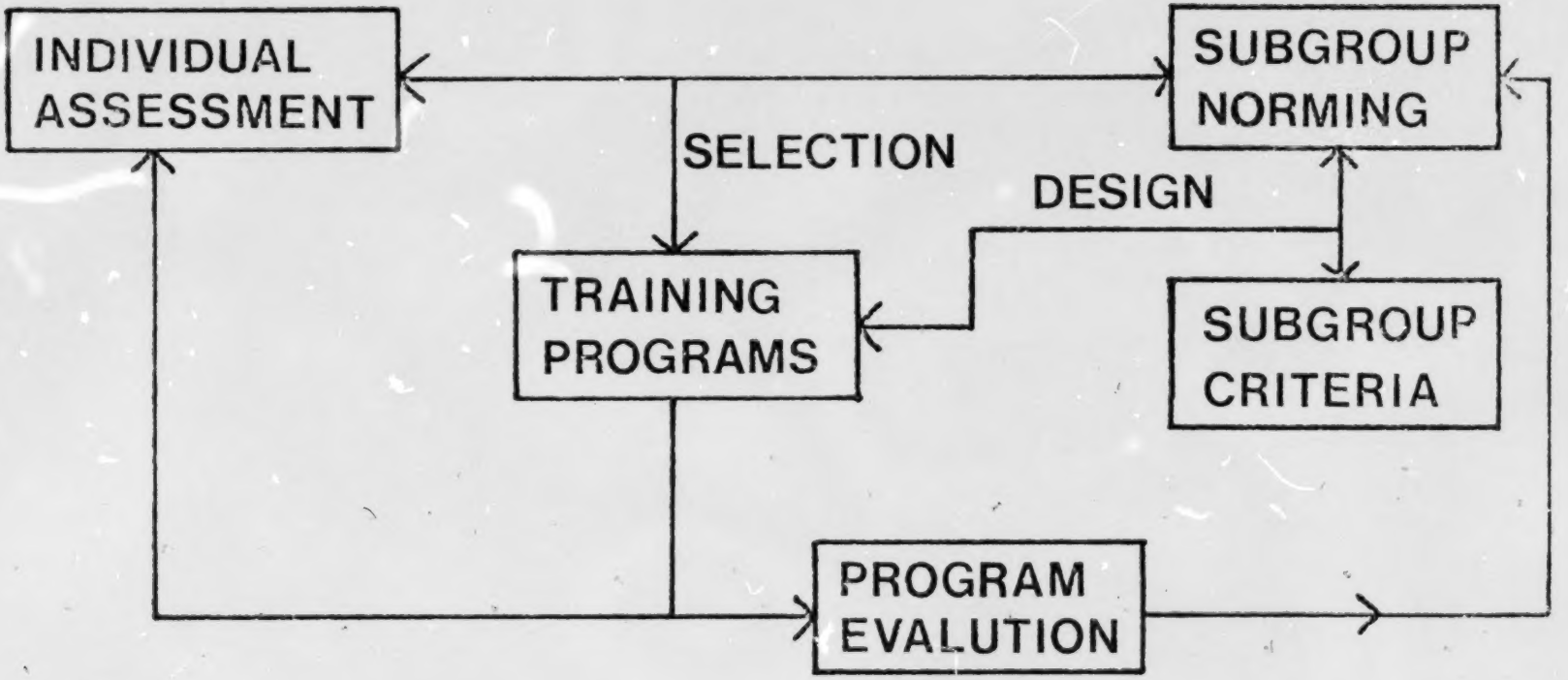
NEEDS, COUNSELLING, AND TRAINING

FIGURE 4



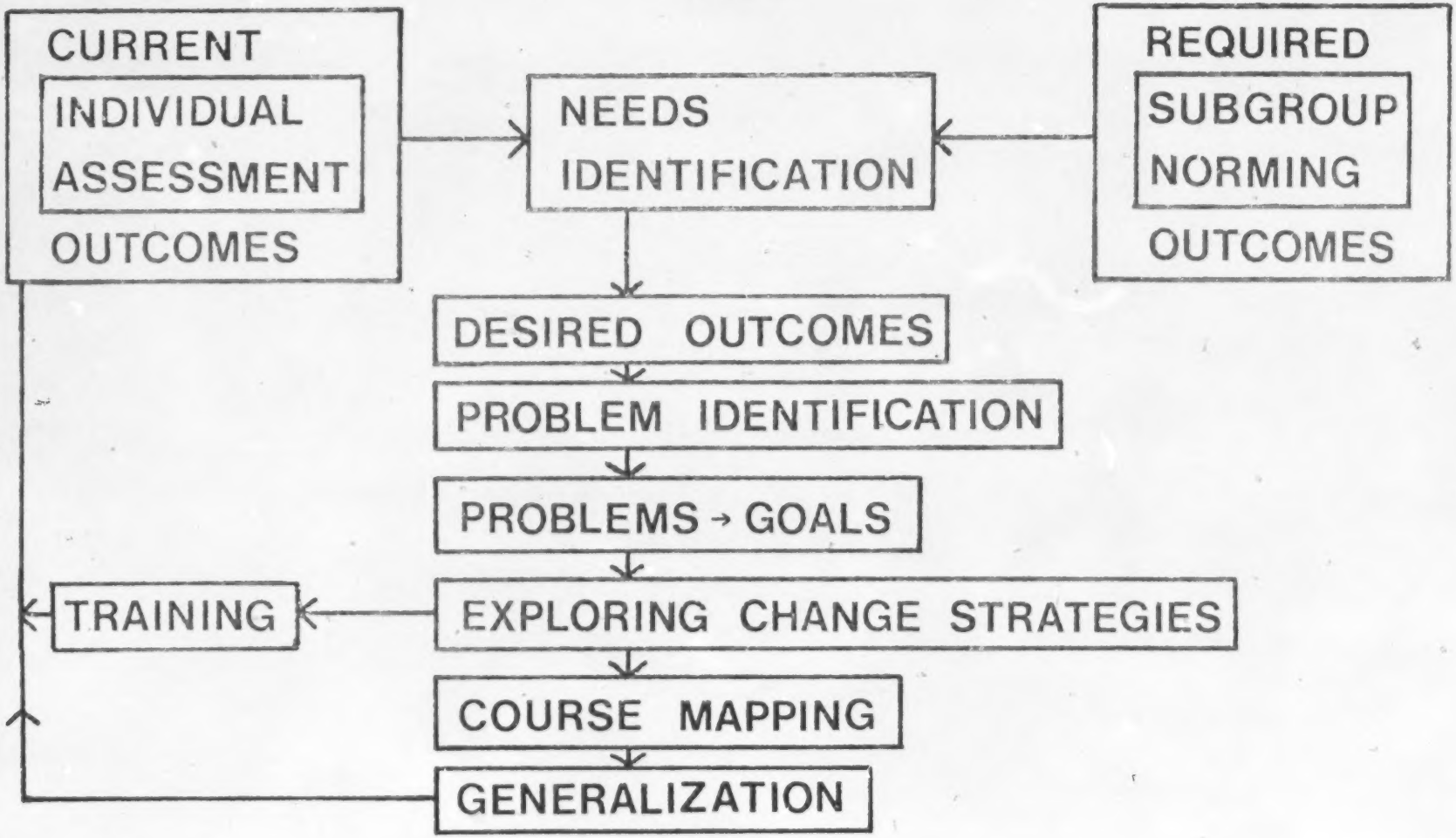
PSYCHOMETRIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT, COUNSELLING AND TRAINING

FIGURE 5



PSYCHOMETRIC NEED IDENTIFICATION AND TRAINING

FIGURE 6



NEED ASSESSMENT AND COUNSELLING

FIGURE 7

California Psychological Inventory

Profile Sheet Executive Male Norms (N=619)

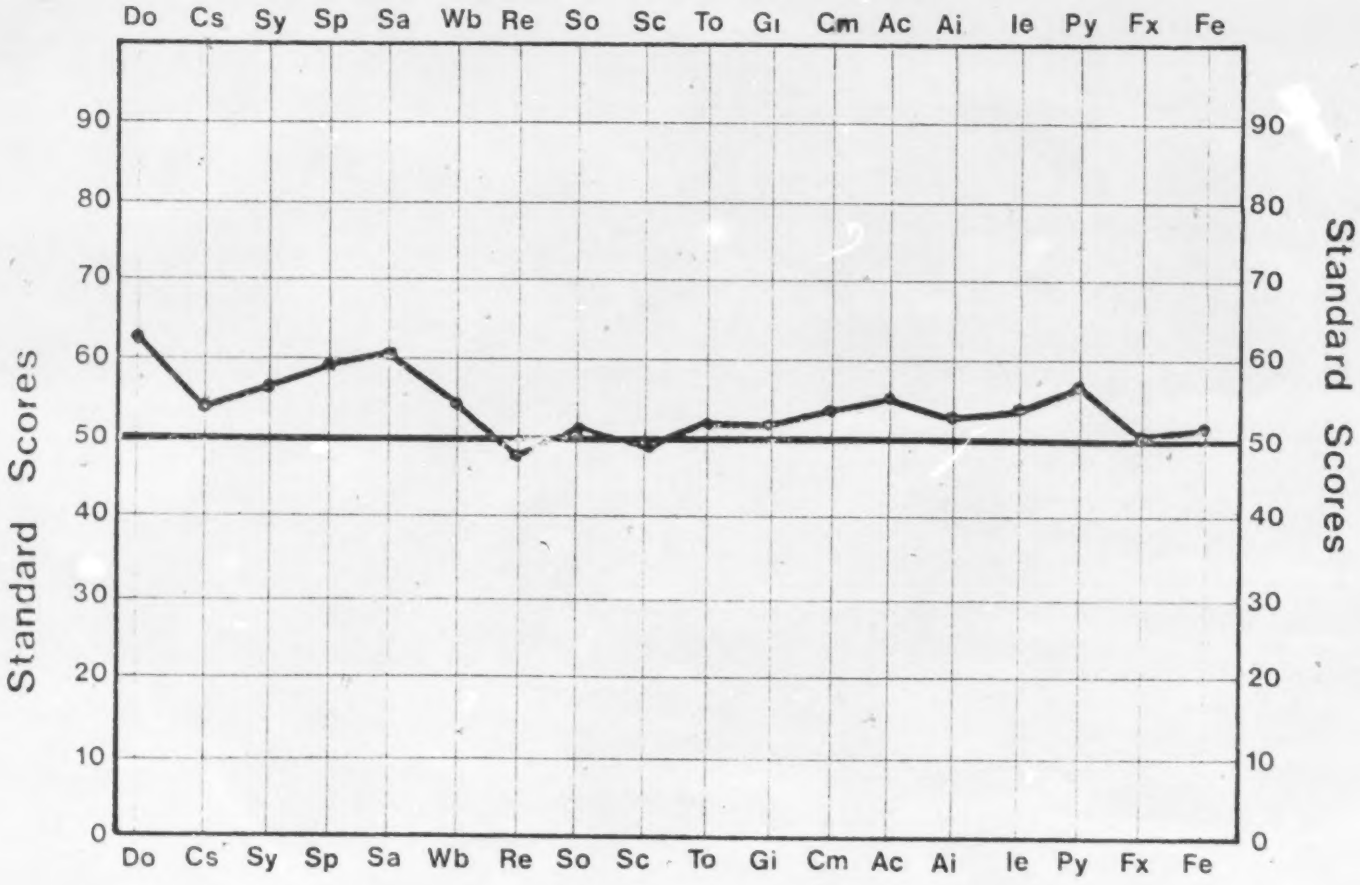


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FIGURE 8

Edwards Personal Preference Schedule

Profile Sheet Executive Male Norms (N=132)

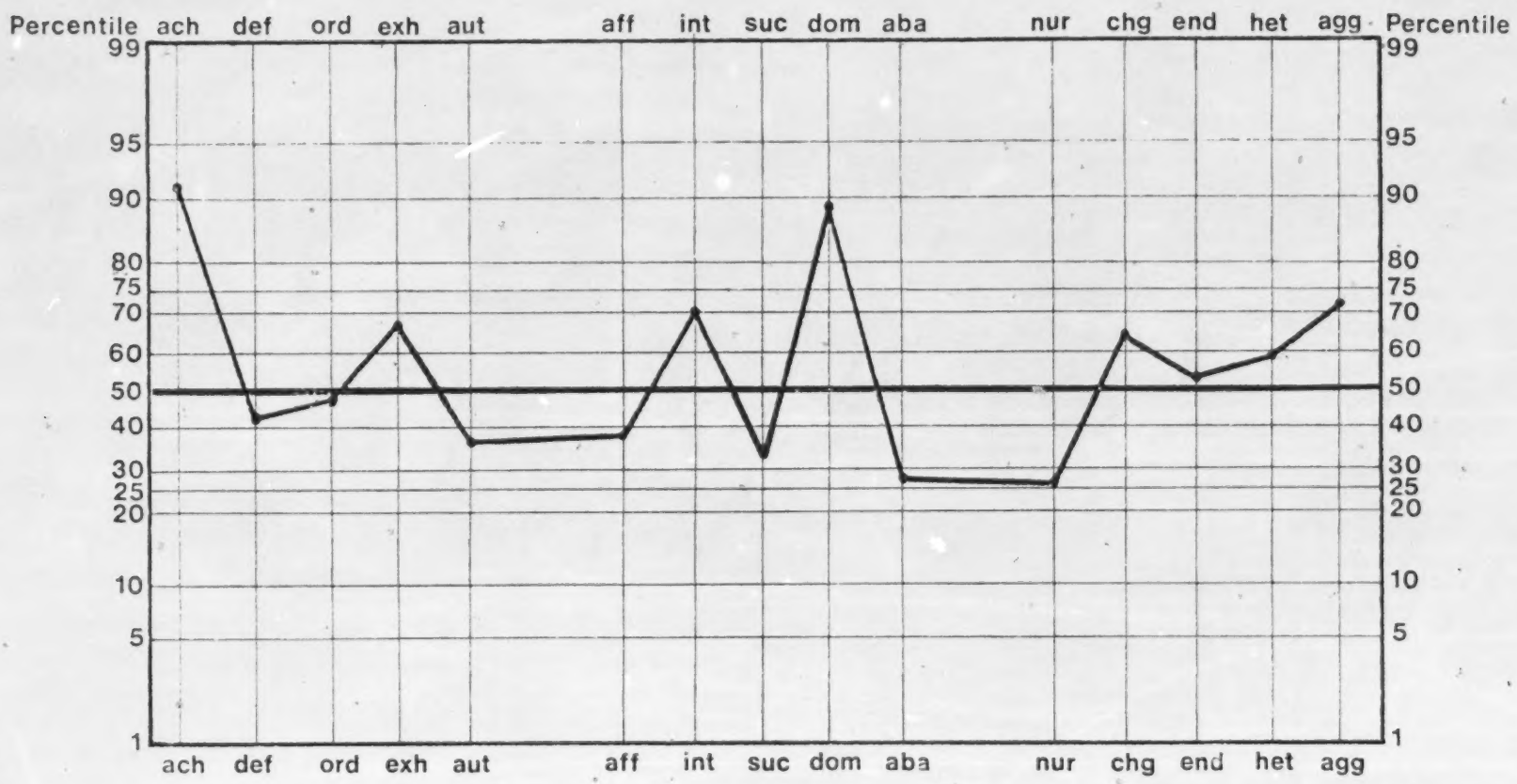

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FIGURE 9

Vocational Preference Inventory

Profile Sheet Executive Male Norms (N=150)

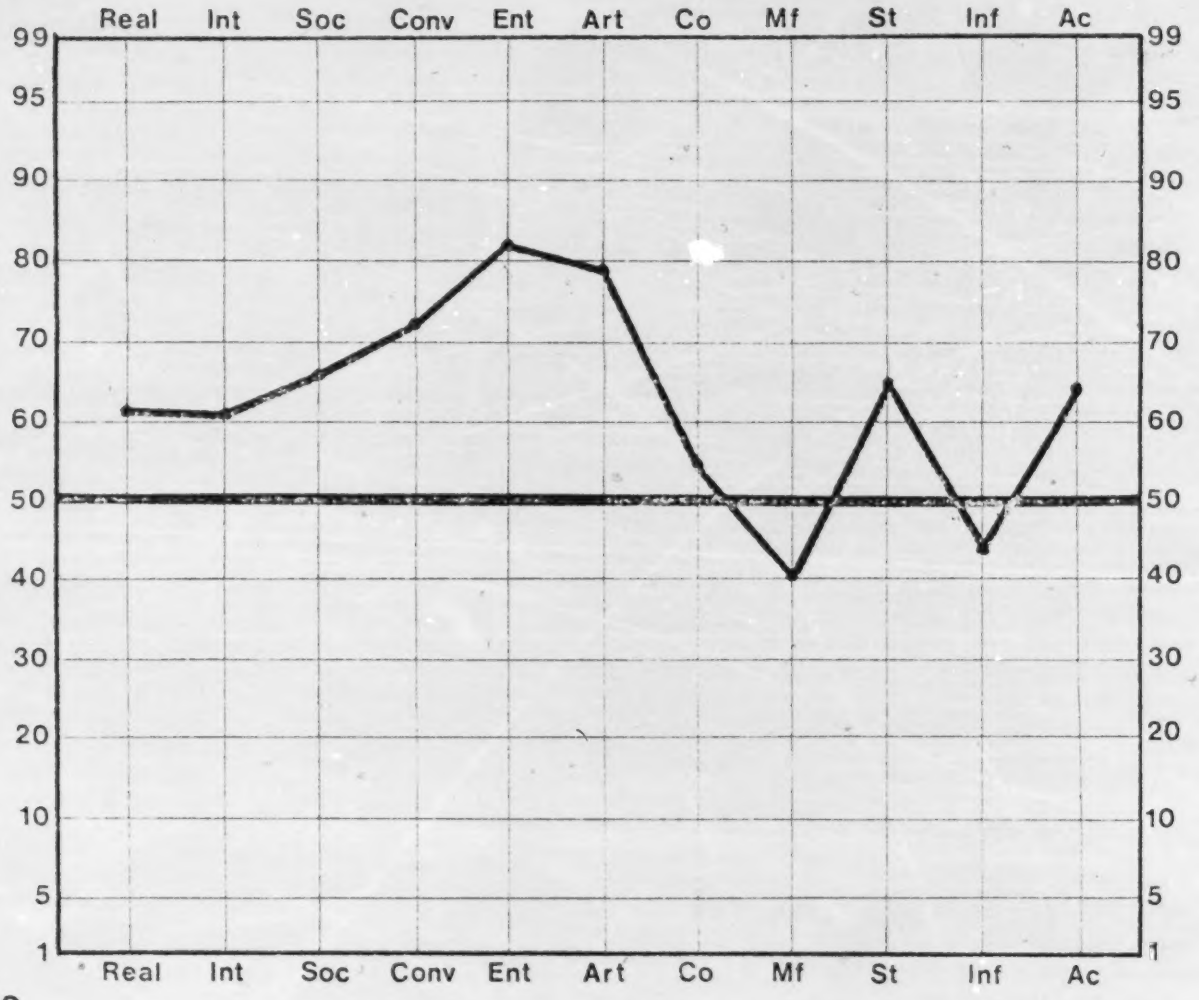

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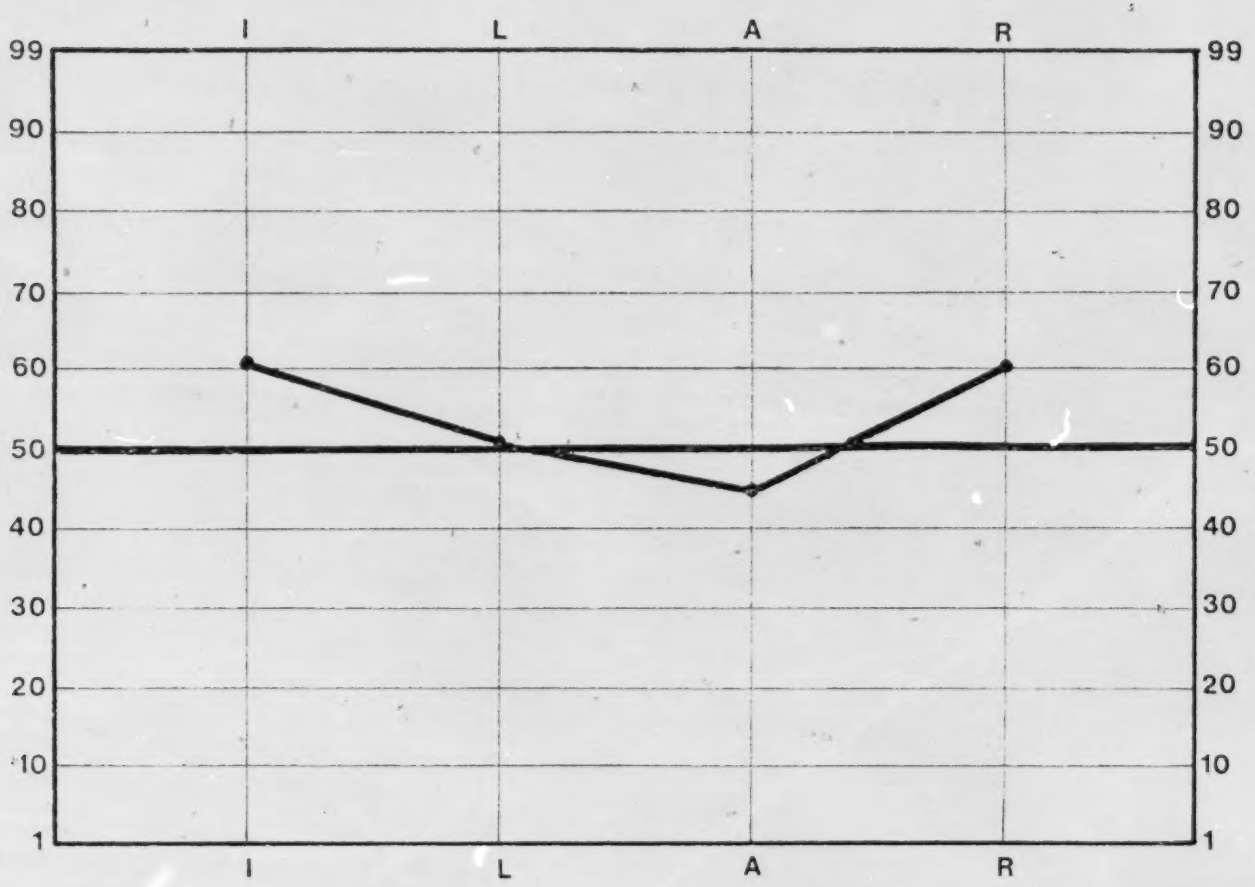
FIGURE 10

Management Aptitude Inventory

Profile Sheet Executive Male Norms (N=149)



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